

Idaho Panhandle Avalanche Center
Avalanche Advisory

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Good Morning, this is the Idaho Panhandle avalanche advisory, valid for today, January 29th, 2010. This report does not apply to local ski areas within the forecast region and will remain in effect through midnight, January 29th. The outlook for the weekend is for periods of snowfall but in moderate amounts with more accumulation expected to the south.

WEATHER

At 0600 this morning mountain air temperatures are hovering in the mid to high 20s and winds are light out of the SE. No new snow has fallen in the last 24 hours and snow accumulation for the past week has been minimal. Snow depths above 5,000 feet across our forecast area are ranging from 5-6 feet and that puts the Panhandle at about 77 percent of average for snow depth to date. The mild weather has had a stabilizing influence on the snowpack but there are some locations where you'll still need to use caution because of persistent weak layers. A new crop of surface hoar has formed and will be buried by the next round of winter storms. For today, the NWS is calling for increasingly cloudy conditions as the next storm moves into our region, temperatures will rise to the mid 30s and winds will be light. The outlook for Saturday is calling for increasing chances of snow as the day progresses with accumulations of one half inch during the day possible. By Saturday night and Sunday there is a strong chance of several inches of new snow to the south with light and variable winds and temperatures in the low 30s. To the north, the chance of snow and total accumulation is slightly less with cooler temperatures. Avalanche conditions will increase with the predicted weather for the outlook period.

Avalanche conditions for the Selkirk and Cabinet Mountains are rated as MODERATE on wind-loaded aspects greater than 35 degrees above 5,000 feet.

Natural avalanches are unlikely and human triggered avalanches are possible.

Avalanche conditions are rated as LOW on all other slopes above 5,000 feet. Natural and human triggered avalanches are unlikely.

Snowpack

In the Selkirk Mountains yesterday at 6,400 feet we found about 5 feet of total snowpack on a north aspect. Surface hoar was nicely formed on all aspects except those steep and sun exposed southerly slopes. Our pit tests revealed a cold snowpack with two weak layers. The upper weak layer was 1.5 feet deep with lighter snow over a denser layer. Faceting was weakening the bond between layers and creating easy to moderate shears. The December 30 surface hoar is still well-formed and shearing cleanly but with moderate to hard force. Sliding conditions were excellent.

Terrain

How do you interpret the condition of our snowpack right now? You can get around very easily in the mountains right now, as long as there is snow cover. We saw numerous avalanches on steep northerly aspects just below cornices and ridgelines. The big terrain is accessible but I would be cautious with the state of that persistent weak layer of surface hoar. More conservative lines up to 35 degrees with less exposure are a better choice. Be aware of windslabs near ridgelines that could be more unstable than the surrounding snow.

Avalanche conditions for the St. Regis Basin are rated as MODERATE on slopes steeper than 35 degrees above 5,000 feet. Natural avalanches are unlikely, *human triggered* avalanches are possible. **Avalanche conditions are rated as LOW on all other slopes above 5,000 feet.** Natural and human triggered avalanches are unlikely.

Snowpack

On Lookout Pass, in about 5 feet of snow Carole found a settling snowpack with multiple layers of melt-freeze. The weakest layer she found was the December 30 surface hoar layer but it was shearing with moderate to hard force applied, so it is gaining strength. This layer is likely somewhat weaker on northerly aspects at higher elevations. Other stress tests did not produce results indicating major weak layers within the pack. She noted much snowmobiling activity in the Basin and observed that tracks were still avoiding the big open bowls and wind-loaded areas.

Terrain

Once you get up into the high country you can travel quite easily. You could find yourself in a high consequence situation if you are not careful. Although our pack is settling and relatively stable, we do have a persistent weak layer that most likely is intact enough on cold northerly aspects that you could be the trigger. Steep terrain below cornices and rocky ridges seem to be the sour spot where natural avalanches have run in the past. Note that another layer of surface hoar will be buried by the next round of storms.

Ed was not able to get out in the St. Joe's yesterday but he mentioned that he will definitely hit the hills next week.

The next advisory will be issued on Friday, February 5th, 2010.

The next round of (**Free**) avalanche workshops for snowmobilers is coming up. The next class will be offered in Lewiston this weekend. Closer to home in Sandpoint we will be meeting at the County Building on the 12th at 7PM for a 2 hour class and the next morning at 8AM up the Pack River at the trailhead. On February 26th go to the USFS building in St. Maries at 7PM for the class and the next day at the Syringa Creek trailhead for the field session. Don't miss the class offered in Priest Lake on March 5th at the Groomer Shed at 7PM and then the field session will head out on Saturday from the Lionhead parking lot. For more information go to the Idaho Parks and Recreation Department website at www.parksandrecreation.idaho.gov, or call Marc Hildesheim, North Region Trails Specialist, at (208) 769-1511.

The Panhandle Avalanche Center in Sandpoint and Sandpoint Parks and Recreation is sponsoring free avalanche workshops for all snowgoers. "Decision Making in the Backcountry" workshops will be offered and 2/10/10. These are offered at the old Federal Building in Sandpoint and are ***Free to the public***. For class schedules in the Silver Valley contact Dan Frigard at 783-2130. In Avery contact Ed Odegaard at 245-6209.

If you have a group or club that is interested in more education on avalanche safety we will be available for free avalanche awareness classes beginning in December, so feel free to give us a call. As usual we would appreciate hearing from anyone who happens to observe any recent avalanche activity while out in the backcountry or just wants to let us know what is going on in their area. You can reach Kevin Davis in Sandpoint by calling (208) 265-6686.

Avalanche conditions change for better or worse continually. Backcountry travelers should be prepared to assess current conditions for themselves, plan their routes of travel accordingly, and never travel alone. Backcountry travelers can reduce their exposure to avalanche hazards by utilizing timbered trails and ridge routes and by avoiding open and exposed terrain with slope angles of 30 degrees or more. Backcountry travelers should carry the necessary avalanche rescue equipment such as a shovel, avalanche probe or probe ski poles, a rescue beacon and a well-equipped first aid kit.

Have a safe and pleasant weekend.